

Sam Kinsley's installations and drawings invent systems of inscriptions to represent the numbers and codes which define us in our daily lives and reduce us to a growing set of numerical notations. Through the transposition of these instruments of identification and control into tangible and expansive material, she seeks to make the viewer aware of the space these abstractions can occupy in our lives. This is the case of her work *Mass* (2012), which she began in her final year at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax and which constructs the burden of her student debt. Kinsley unrolled an immense spool of paper, which she jabbed with as many pinpricks as there are cents in her debt. This host of small holes is reminiscent of the old perforated cards used with the earliest computers. The work is also based on a coin, the penny, which has recently been withdrawn from use in Canada.

For the art historian Amber Berson, *Mass*, although it is rooted in a drawing practice, creates in fact a negative space. Kinsley's work, she maintains, "results in the absence of a product, an act of visual sabotage to the accepted system in regards to debt."¹ If the effect of the operation is to wind up a sum, it has even more resonance today, with the penny having disappeared from our commercial transactions. Berson is right to see *Mass* as the destruction of matter opening onto a void, yet she paradoxically does not remark that this void has now taken over our space to a considerable extent, and that in this sense it has become unavoidable.

The laborious act of perforating the paper – a calculation, a summing up, but also a ritual – can undoubtedly be seen as a

transference, in the psychoanalytic sense of the term, of a pecuniary weight to an emotive charge resulting from the impossibility of escaping the oppressive responsibility of such a financial burden. The billowing paper unfurled in the exhibition gallery reaches a volume that only this systematic transposition of numerical data is able to measure.

The installation is a dual self-portrait of the artist at a remove: the first, in the eyes of the banking authorities, is embodied by her financial debt, while the second corresponds to Kinsley's investment in the production of her work, an investment which can be measured in time, energy and volume. In this difference a re-appropriation of social identity takes place through the long ritual that introduces a private dimension into a rigorous, patient and attentive task centred on the artist's activity. This artisanal work is not without similarities to Braille, and thus to reading by touch – precisely as it arrests the digital. It rests on adroit finger-work which defers pecuniary value and gives it the appearance, one supposes, of the host of data that define our existence and take the shape of a cloud or perhaps even a nebula.

¹ Amber Berson, "Statistics as Portraiture: Sam Kinsley and *Mass*," personal web site of the author, <http://www.amberberson.ca/writings/statistics-as-portraiture>, consulted 19 June 2013; initially published in September 2012 when the work was shown at Articule in Montréal.